

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Action or Atrophy: 2021 is in your hands

As 2021 emerges from the dust and devastation of the previous year, we are reminded of how vital it is to regularly flex our political muscle to ensure our democracy is kept healthy and vibrant. Political disengagement and apathy provide an opportunity for powerful interests to fill the political void, with the single aim of hollowing out our democratic institutions and stifling public interests. All this ultimately serves the interests of large corporations and the superrich. 2020 demanded of us many collective and individual sacrifices. For the large proportion of Australians, the collective demands placed on us required self-isolation, the curtailment of our freedoms, and the way in which we as a community interacted with one another. Many Australians lost their jobs and with it the security of a regular income. Others lost opportunities to develop their skills, education and careers, while others lost their health and some lost their lives. Clearly, such collective sacrifices were aimed at benefitting society as a whole. Yet, a small section in our society benefitted immensely as the combined worth of Australian billionaires had increased by 52.4% in the past higher in December 2020 than at the same time twelve months. As the big corporations and the superrich boosted their profits during the pandemic, the rest of the nation displayed commitment to battling COVID-19.

2021 will bring about its own set of challenges which will include the unfolding climate disaster, rising inequality and the continuing battle with COVID-19. As we settle into 2021, will Australians take the opportunity to flex their political muscle and demand change for a better and fairer society or will our political muscle atrophy?

What is atrophy, and how does it impact us?

Atrophy is a medical term that generally refers to the physical wasting away of the body or an organ, usually through degeneration or decline that may occur through disuse. Politically, atrophy occurs when citizens fail to exercise their democratic rights, and as a consequence lose such rights. For example, when citizens do not actively bring politicians and corporations to account. The past year has highlighted a number of questionable and deplorable events that have occurred (eg. the \$30 million purchase of the Western Sydney airport

land, the Sports Rorts affair, the destruction of Aboriginal cultural sites by Rio Tinto, the investigation into 'unlawful' SAS killings in Afghanistan to name a few). Meanwhile, the political opposition has largely remained silent instead of doing its job of holding the government to account. The lack of public interest by way of political apathy and disengagement opens the door to political excess, cover-ups and corruption.

The circus that has passed for the Presidential election and transfer of power in the US has highlighted two issues; firstly, it has distracted our attention from critical issues such as the climate disaster, the degradation of our land and seas, rising inequality, global conflicts and our collective focus on better tackling the global pandemic. Secondly, the political circus has clearly highlighted the consequences of a nation stymied by a two-party system where American citizens are too busy backing one rich white guy against another rich white guy whilst corporate America continues to do what it does best – manipulate the system to enrich itself at the cost of ordinary citizens.

Unfortunately, this month's events in the US come as no surprise. The storming of the Capitol building comes in a long line of events that have been prompted by opportunistic politicians and shameless media outlets fixed on turning a profit. The Trump presidency is merely the continuation of previous Administrations. From presidents Reagan to Obama, Clinton to Bush, all have made grand promises to secure the presidency. Despite promising to improve people's lives, each outgoing Administration has left a string of disasters (for example, wars overseas, financial collapse, increased inequality and growing social divisions). The Trump Administration is simply following suit, with the exception that his approach has been 'turbo charged.' Trump's experience as a business oligarch and a former reality TV celebrity has given him a unique approach that appealed to millions of voters. With the unquestioning support of Murdoch's Fox News, and until recently free access to broadcast his messages on influential social media platforms, a relationship of convenience was forged; Trump communicated what he wanted, and media outlets continued to maximise profit. This mutual relationship is not new as the corporate media relentlessly works to set the social and political agenda. Meanwhile, the US population has been steered into the current political crisis courtesy of the colourful, fast-paced and sensationalised 'news' that has been delicately crafted by the corporate media.

The Trump era is merely the continuation of previous Administrations. What we are witnessing is the acceleration of a process which is designed to leave heads spinning; as one political crisis emerges, another is fermenting. Time to analyse, process and take corrective action no longer matters as the show moves on at lightning speed. The era of media sensationalisation and political spectacle has landed as it attempts to supplant reality. Political spin, polls egged on by the corporate media fixated on short term events openly challenges good ideas, solid policy, and good politics. Marketing the spectacle rather than dealing with substance works to undermine people's genuine demands, and building a better and fairer world. Ultimately, people become complacent, and disengaged in the political process – atrophy is encouraged as the corporate media maximises its profits.

Why is there political atrophy?

Ideology is a powerful force when it works well. Aided and abetted by media oligarchs, the small and powerful section of society is able to get people to do what they want without any coercion.

How is this done? Fear and aggression are the corporate owned media's key ingredients in shaping public opinion. This is topped with sensationalisation and served up fresh on the 24-hour media cycle. Today's political theatre is able to overshadow issues of public importance. Spectacle in the guise of media celebrities, sensationalised events, fear campaigns, sport and so on form the smoke screen that blinds the public from issues of substance such as rising inequality, the climate crisis, diminishing accountability of our political class, gaps in education, health and housing.

The corporate owned media plays an integral role in shaping the public's opinion and manufacturing our consent. The major political parties are influenced by the whims of media barons as political presentations and overtures to the superrich have become more important than good government and bold policy. The corporate media camouflages the inequalities and injustices in society by dumbing down issues. The 24-hour news cycle ensures that solid analysis, debate and accountability are sidelined as the next sensationalised media event is broadcast. The lack of time, willingness and responsibility to think things through ultimately leads to poor governance and accountability. As a consequence, the ruling ideology entrenches itself, as it is unchallenged except from the fringes. For the past four decades, we have witnessed the ruling ideology transform the concept of 'citizens' into 'customers.' The aim being to weaken the public's duty to be politically and

socially active. This is how the public's political muscle atrophies, and we devolve from active citizens to inactive customers who crave security and luxury at the expense of liberty, equality and accountability.

As we have witnessed in the US, decades of civic complacency and political disengagement has enabled powerful interests to hollow out democracy enabling control from the governing class that promote and support the wealth and influence of corporations and the superrich. This month's events have demonstrated the even Donald Trump has been able to shatter the wafer-thin shell of US democracy.

The lesson that we must take from this is that political activism is essential, and it must be regularly exercised. Sitting at home and backing one of the major political parties will not make a difference.

There is enough to go around

Australia is a resource rich nation; it is a wealthy nation with enough to go around. In a country like ours, there simply should be no poverty and homelessness. Our health and education systems should be second to none. Australians of all social and cultural backgrounds should not experience inequality and deprivation.

However, the wealth of our land and its people continue to be exploited by a small section of society that has one goal – to maximise their personal wealth. While the majority of Australians collectively work to beat the impact of COVID-19, our largest corporations and the superrich press forward to maximise their profits. Meanwhile, the major parties continue to promote privatisation and deregulation which in turn facilitates inequality and insecurity.

What enough looks like

The management and distribution of our nation's wealth requires a new approach that places public needs ahead of private wants. By promoting 'public leisure' ahead of 'private leisure', our nation's collective wealth can be dedicated to addressing the huge gaps in public needs and supporting public leisure. This means building facilities for the public to use such as public housing, improved public schools, community pools, galleries, museums,

gardens, recreation areas, etc. To develop a balance that meets public needs and wants, public leisure needs to be balanced by implementing private sustenance. That is, excessive wealth in private hands needs to be limited should it come at the expense of the wider public. The current economic model promotes competition and individual wealth. Do we all need private swimming pools, luxury cars and large houses with individually manicured gardens and outdoor living areas to entertain friends and family? Clearly not! However, our economic system promotes wealth for the few at the expense of the majority and to the detriment of our natural environment. Capitalism's insatiable drive for economic growth is greatly contributing to the destruction of our environment.

Turning things around

For over forty years the neoliberal ideology has been redefining our terms of reference – we are being transformed from citizens into customers. The major political parties and large corporations supported by the corporate media have aimed to narrow our political and social imagination. As customers we are limited to a life of consumption as our social and political world is defined by the 'market' and maximising one's wealth is the ultimate goal. It is time to become a citizen again by flexing your social and political muscle and promoting collaboration within your community and working for the progress for all, and not for the privileged few.

Anthony B – Website Editor
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